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Showcasing Talent

by John DeMont

Halifax's waterfront is being transformed into what developers hope will be the next great cultural district.

The first time he saw the long expanse of derelict cargo sheds along the waterfront in Halifax, Eberhard Zeidler, the German-born, Canada-based master of transforming urban wastelands into multiuse buildings, had an immediate, visceral reaction. "Such a great piece of land and water," Zeidler remembers thinking. "You just wish you could do something with it." The big question he had—along with Halifax architect Andy Lynch and the other members of the planning team considering the space—was this: do what exactly? Offices were out of the question: Halifax, the capital of Nova Scotia with a population of 360,000, already had more than its share of unused commercial space. In addition, the charter of the Halifax Port Authority (HPA), which owns the waterfront land, forbids condominium or apartment complexes.

Eventually, the answer came to Zeidler: build something in the spirit of his friend, acclaimed urban guru Jane Jacobs, a proponent of multiuse developments that promote urban density with lots of public space. The team decided to borrow a page from the au courant urban development thinkers, who say that attracting creative people is the key to prospering in the 21st century, and create with Halifax's Seawall development one of the next great cultural districts—one that would help revitalize the historic Canadian coastal city.

"For me, architecture is two things: the building and the people," says Zeidler. "It can't be just a beautiful thing where people don't want to go." He aims for what he calls "livable urban environments"—flexible, multiuse buildings that are attractive, as well as good places for people to work, live, or simply loiter. Zeidler recounts being intrigued when HPA officials began assembling a team to take on redeveloping Canada's last great remaining waterfront. The officials wanted to do more than just build a shopping mall, an entertainment center, an office complex, or some other

single-use project. They wanted to build a community.

The port itself was facing its own challenges. Halifax, which has one of the world's deepest and largest natural harbors, has been a port town since the first English settlers arrived in 1749. But changes in shipping traffic meant the port's defining feature—huge sheds atop the piers on the south end of the waterfront—had fallen into disuse. HPA's executives wanted to do something with that space, which had become home to a battery of bohemian artists' studios and a growing cruise ship port of call.

"Any development needed to pay for itself by being financially self-sufficient and sustainable in the long term," notes Krista Dempsey, HPA vice president of real estate. "It was essential, as well, that it help stimulate the local economy—one of the port authority's mandates."

In 2003, Robert Todd, former president of a Halifax construction company, was hired to develop a concept plan and to help craft a request for proposals designed to find the right combination of talent to take on the project. Andy Lynch, whose Halifax-based firm Lydon Lynch Architects had completed several major local projects, signed on with Zeidler and a team of experts, including Ron Taylor, senior vice president of Toronto-based real estate services firm O&Y Enterprise, who continues to work with the HPA on implementing the plan.

Taylor and Zeidler had worked together on a similar challenge on the Toronto waterfront, where an old warehouse with rail lines running into the first floor was slated for demolition. The eight-story structure, which became known as Queen's Quay Terminal, was turned into a mix of offices, retail space, parking, and condominiums, and is now considered one of the most successful examples of mixed-use redevelopment ever undertaken in North America. The award-winning multiuse complex, widely praised as the first step in restoring vitality to Toronto's moribund waterfront, also demonstrated a principle that would inform several projects completed since by Zeidler and Taylor, either together or separately. "This isn't just about real estate," says Taylor. "It's about setting up a dynamic that creates a fertile environment for everyone who works, lives, and plays there."

The pair decided there was only one way to create the right atmosphere on the Halifax waterfront—by creating a development emphasizing the city's thriving artistic community. It is a model that has worked for them before. Taylor has been involved in mixed-use complexes such as London's Canary Wharf, New York's Battery Park City, and, perhaps most notably, Yerba Buena Gardens, a once-blighted sector of San Francisco that he helped the city turn into an urban oasis complete with internationally acclaimed architecture and multiple cultural facilities, as well as the Moscone Convention Center.

"We're not pioneering here," concedes Taylor. "But every place and project is different. It's a mistake to think you can take what you did in one place and just apply it somewhere else." He believes that every new project, in fact, needs to have roots in the local community—to reflect the particular geography, history, and mind-set of its setting.

A visit to the Seawall site reveals that a transformation is already underway. Pier 21, located on the spot where millions of immigrants first landed in North America, was refurbished and reopened in 1999 as a museum. The Cruise Pavilion serves the more than 100 cruise ships that arrive in Halifax each season. There also is commercial space for tenants like Comweb, a film production services company that works for clients from across Canada and Los Angeles as part of Halifax's thriving film and television production industry. And a new park area connects the Seawall area to a waterfront boardwalk.

The real job, though, is just beginning. Zeidler, Taylor, and Lynch want to turn this Halifax waterfront parcel into an example of adaptive use—taking old buildings that have outlived their original purpose and adapting them for new uses while retaining their historic features. “The challenge is to see old forms and shapes and realize how these could grow into a beautiful environment, not an isolated piece,” says Lynch. “We want this to be a continuation of the city’s harborfront.”

That fundamental approach pervades the project, which, when complete in 2014, will cover land stretching 3,000 yards along the harbor. The intent is for the look, feel, and spirit of the site to remain consistent across the old, restored sections and the built-from-scratch portions. This approach will be evident at a cultural industries building at the far end of the complex, which will be home to a television and radio broadcast center, a boutique hotel, and offices and workspaces for cultural enterprises. Though new, it is going to remain true to the city’s—and area’s—briny, somewhat rough-and-tumble roots by preserving the structures and their industrial nature while layering in new uses, so that work at the cultural industries will unfold against the backdrop of the grain elevators and cranes used by the harbor industries.

Also slated is a makeover of 500,000 square feet of existing shed space. The idea is to return these buildings to their former glory under the watchful eye of Montreal heritage consultant Julia

Gersovitz, who describes the process as “maintaining, conserving, and even enhancing to achieve an even more powerful impact.” When the architects stepped into one old shed, for example, they discovered that an interesting form made of structural steel supported the entire building. They are leaving that form intact, preserving the building’s warehouse look, and turning the structure into a pavilion for the hundreds of thousands of ocean liner passengers who visit the city each summer. Nearby, a bridge that once carried newcomers from Pier 21 to the port’s immigration annex in the train station is being refurbished so visitors can walk down an authentic piece of Canadian history. “[The developers] have made an important contribution to the story of Pier 21 and the story of Canada,” declares Ruth Goldbloom, founder and a director of the Pier 21 Society.

The literal and figurative centerpiece, though, will be the arts district, a mix of refurbished sheds that eventually will accommodate workspaces and studios for painters, sculptors, photographers, designers, and filmmakers, plus galleries and performance spaces where they can exhibit and sell their work. A new film/media production center will nurture the talent of budding filmmakers. “The arts are our biggest industry,” says Victor Syperek, an entrepreneur, arts advocate, and former theater and film set designer who once worked in the space where the Seawall will soon stand. “This gives us a chance to build the kind of critical mass to really take off.”

Next year, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) is planning to open its second campus here. Founded in 1887 by Anna Leonowens, the British teacher portrayed in *The King and I*, NSCAD was rated the best art school in North America in a 1973 article in *Art in America* magazine. By the 1990s, though, the college had lost some of its edge. At the helm now is Paul Greenhalgh, a curator and art scholar, who left a job as head of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London to run a school with fewer than 1,000 full-time students and housed in a series of aging buildings in downtown Halifax.

Greenhalgh arrived with a strong conviction that Halifax was bursting with the same kind of creative energy, technological smarts, and entrepreneurial spirit that in the 1900s put cities like Glasgow and Brussels on the leading edge of the art nouveau design and art movement—a subject on which he is one of the world’s foremost experts. He wanted NSCAD to do its part to help Halifax blossom.

The main element limiting the school's growth has always been a lack of space. The Seawall, home to a second NSCAD campus for at least the next 40 years, is intended to change that. The 70,000 square feet under lease will give NSCAD room for its metal foundries, wood shops, sculpture studios, and ceramics kilns. The college is expected to serve as a magnet for activity, as well as an anchor. Its students will need year-round restaurants, coffee shops, and pubs to keep the creative juices flowing, and they will draw other students to the complex, along with tourists to watch them working at their foundries and kilns. They also will attract accountants, lawyers, information technology experts, and anyone else who makes a living supporting students and artists. "Our presence will create the kind of buzz of life that incubates businesses," maintains Greenhalgh.

And those businesses are expected not just to cater to the locals. Many of the renovations are designed to appeal to cruise passengers, who already spend about \$20 million in Halifax each year. The city has a visitor welcome center, as well as a home-port facility from which passengers from Halifax can catch their own cruises or join a bus tour.

Zeidler and Taylor make public spaces a large part of all their developments. Some they describe as passive places, where a person can read a book, drink a cup of coffee, or just sit and watch the passing humanity. Others are designed to be active—for instance, with a string quartet playing for morning commuters, an end-of-day winetasting workshop, or a mime performance, or to act as a European-style plaza spilling over with life. In this kind of environment, every spot is designed to be welcoming for people, whether they are seniors sipping a midmorning cappuccino, students off to class during the day and partying at night, or young families catching a Saturday morning performance. In addition, art is everywhere. In the Seawall public spaces, which will be home to an endless succession of performances and events, local artists and art students will have created the furniture people sit on and the paintings and sculptures they look at.

The idea, explains Taylor, is for visitors to undergo what he calls "a continual experience" as they move through the new district complex. In the case of the Seawall project, there will be unobstructed views of the harbor and easy access to the walkway around the Halifax waterfront. The desire for those two elements was expressed repeatedly during the two public consultations with Halifax residents held last year, part of an effort to carefully consider where the project fits into the larger community. "We couldn't be an island," says Taylor. "We wanted to be part of the community and part of the city."

That fits perfectly with the HPA's commitment to principles like smart growth—ensuring that the project has a mix of uses and sound economic underpinnings so that it is sustainable. Because sustainable development is another of the project's overriding priorities, the Seawall will emphasize preserving and enhancing the natural and built environments, and use natural resources efficiently by promoting energy-efficient buildings, cogeneration of energy, and recycling programs.

The Seawall project will provide Halifax's artists with the kind of critical mass that helps attract people's attention—and their disposable income. Making the Seawall a year-round draw for locals also will do wonders for a downtown that in recent years has suffered from a steady exodus of shops and services to the fast-growing suburbs and industrial parks outside the city. "If half of what is expected happens, it's going to make a huge difference," comments John Macnab, a sculptor who has maintained a studio in the waterfront shed area since 1999.

Gritty old European cities like Liverpool and Glasgow, their economies devastated by the loss of old-style industries, have used long-ignored cultural industries to turn over a new leaf. On this side of the Atlantic, smaller spots like Austin, Texas, and Birmingham, Alabama, also have revitalized themselves with new arts communities. If one subscribes to the thinking of Richard Florida, it

makes perfect sense. He maintains that the cities on the ascent are the ones rich in creative capital—artists, thinkers, scientists, and entrepreneurs—who tend to seek interesting, creative, attractive places to live and work. Competing on Creativity, a 2004 report by Meric Gertler and Tara Vinodrai of the University of Toronto, showed that Halifax already does pretty well in this regard, ranking fourth among Canadian cities according to Florida’s “talent index,” based on the proportion of citizens with a bachelor’s degree or higher, and seventh on his “bohemian index,” based on the percentage of the population that works in creative or artistic occupations.

Taylor cites as an example Glasgow, which a couple of decades ago was a dying city. By 1990, though, things had turned around to the extent that Glasgow was anointed Europe’s City of Culture for the year. Now, Halifax is betting that the Seawall will help showcase its homegrown talent for the outside world.

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